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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

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INCREASING ACCEPTABILITY OF THE SCHOOL LUNCH

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Continual thought and effort go into the planning, preparation, and service of food in most school lunch programs to provide nutritionally desirable lunches that appeal to children.

Even when Type A lunches look good and taste good, problems arise with special groups in the school population. Some children will not eat enough to meet their needs while others are still hungry after eating a full lunch. Encouraging the former to fully participate is an educational process which can be implemented by well-chosen classroom experiences and clever merchandizing of the lunch. Providing for the "still hungry" group has been a challenge to lunch managers for some time.

In this issue of NCN, we describe the contributions of various school-personnel teams concerned with teaching children to eat and enjoy a well-selected lunch and school activities which helped to solve special student-feeding problems.

LUNCH PARTICIPATION—CONCERN OF MANY

Wholehearted acceptance of the school lunch by children is generally the result of the concerted efforts of administrators, school lunch staff, and teachers with the understanding cooperation of parents. Each has a contribution to make which reinforces or supplements the efforts of others.

Administrators.—Principals or superintendents and Boards of Education can contribute to a well-run school lunch program in a number of ways.

An example of such a contribution resulted from the cooperation between the principal and staff of Sparta Township Elementary School, Sparta, N. J., and the staff of a nutrition education research project in testing ideas for initiatitng nutrition education programs in schools. Observation of children's food practices in the school lunchroom and interpretation of children's breakfast records gave some idea of nutritional problems and how the situation might be improved through the school lunch service and well-chosen classroom activities.

The food service was directed by a cook-manager whose duties had been vaguely defined. Lunches served met Type A standards but due to high table waste many children did not eat a Type A lunch. Meals varied little. Sometimes even the way food was put on plates detracted from its appetite appeal. Furniture in the lunchroom was unattractive and uncomfortable. Participation in the lunch program was understandably low.

The principal, teachers, and research staff considered the problem and came to the following conclusions: The cook-manager needed professional help in menu planning, and food purchasing and serving; a supplementary milk program was needed; teachers could set a good example for children in the lunchroom situation; and comfortable dining room furniture might be conducive to more leisurely eating on the part of both children and teachers.

Convinced of the importance of a good school lunch to the health and academic progress of students, the principal advised the Board of Education of the situation. The Board, in turn, agreed to pay all expenses for the cook-manager to attend the summer workshop given at Rutgers University for school lunch personnel. A home economist was hired on a part-time basis to supervise menu planning and other food management problems. Attractive and comfortable furniture was purchased for the lunchroom. A supplementary milk program was initiated.

The principal realized that although a good example can be set for children by having teachers eat with their classes, the welfare of teachers must be considered also. Teachers need and should have some time in the middle of the day for relaxation.

Lunch periods could be staggered because most children were transported by bus and did not go home for lunch. It was also possible for the principal to schedule lunches and subjects taught by specialists—art, music, physical education, industrial arts—in such a way that teachers could eat with their classes and still have approximately 35 minutes completely free of responsibility. Before the principal proceeded with final scheduling, teachers were consulted, given an opportunity to discuss the importance of their role in the lunchroom situation, and finally were asked to indicate their willingness or unwillingness to eat with their students. The teachers voted to eat with the children.

A year later a second set of breakfast records was taken and lunch observations were repeated. Comparison showed an increase in school lunch participation, a decrease in food waste, and milk consumption nearer the levels recommended for children. Teachers were happier with the lunch situation and many were giving classroom emphasis to foods served in the school lunch.

School lunch staff.—Many school lunch managers in all parts of the country have studied eating patterns of children and have worked untiringly to modify poor practices while maintaining good ones. Lunches often include national and regional dishes as well as foods such as hamburgers, which are perennial favorites among children.

Care has been used in introducing new foods. In some instances a taste of a new dish is served prior to its appearance on the menu.

Managers and lunch workers have been ingenious in their innovations to create an interesting and pleasant atmosphere in which children may eat. Holiday decorations in the dining room, interesting food garnishes, and colorful bulletin board displays add to the appeal of the lunch.

In some schools, managers have assumed educational responsibilities along with other faculty members. At Park Hills School, Spartansburg, S. C., each faculty member and the school lunch manager rotate responsibility for an educational display in the front hall of the school. One display emphasized the reasons for including milk in the daily diet by comparing the amounts of various foods that would have to be eaten to get the calcium contained in a quart of milk. The students in the fifth grade wrote letters to the manager commenting on their interest in the display and naming many of their favorite milk dishes served in the school lunch. Similar displays emphasizing other important foods showed that it takes many kinds of foods to make a good diet.

In other schools, the lunch staff have found many ways to create and maintain informed interest in school food service. For example, menus are often published in newspapers or announced on local radio and TV programs to help parents understand the service and to avoid duplication in meals at home.

The school lunch department of Pinellas County, Fla., in cooperation with the local television station WSUN, St. Petersburg, tried something new this school year. Once each week school lunch staff provided a display made of real food to be featured on the leading children's program, "Nicky, the Clown," which the children were encouraged to watch. Each school had a similar display the following day and featured a recipe using the foods in the display.

One week the display was a policeman, "Safety Sam," made of vegetables—a red cabbage body, large onion head, carrot legs, and green onion arms. "Nicky" told a story about children going safely to and from school with the help of the police at crossings. The value of vegetables as protective foods was woven into the story also and the fact that these particular vegetables made a delicious cole slaw that would be served the next day in school lunches throughout the county was emphasized. "Nicky" urged all the children to look for "Safety Sam" in their school and to taste the cole slaw.

The schools report that children eagerly look for the display and happily taste the food "Nicky the Clown" recommends. For many children this activity provides an incentive to try for the first time foods previously rejected. Such an activity provides repeated experiences with new foods—so essential to forming the habit of tasting a new food before rejecting it.

Teachers.—Classroom teachers have reinforced the efforts of school lunch workers by discussing the menu of the day, pointing out the similarity of a new dish to foods children know and enjoy, and by setting a good example for pupils with their own attitude toward the lunch.

Tasting parties in classrooms afford an opportunity for students to taste a variety of important foods, while field trips to the school kitchen at appropriate hours allow pupils to see where their lunch comes from and the effort required to produce it.

A 4th and 5th grade teacher in Beavercreek School, Xenia, Ohio, noticed the poor eating habits of children in the lunchroom. Trays often went back half emptied. Children seemed listless and not inclined to study or play as they should. She saw the possibility of integrating the school lunch experience into a classroom project in which all children participated.

The teacher had several objectives—to help her pupils establish or make permanent, desirable eating habits and acceptable table manners, to gain a knowledge of food,

and to develop an appreciation of what it means to be a citizen of one of the best fed nations in the world.

Nutrition was emphasized in the study of health, social studies, and science. The school lunchroom became the laboratory where classroom learnings were practiced. Repeated experiences with desirable food combinations promoted the formation of good eating habits.

Attention to acceptable table manners, courtesy to others, and expression of appreciation for favorite foods aided in the development of the social graces.

A study of the food patterns of children living in other countries helped youngsters to know and appreciate the variety of foods available to them.

In planning for a field trip to a museum the teacher decided to arrange for the children to practice school lunch learnings by eating in a large restaurant. When she asked to reserve space for 45 to eat in the main dining room the owner was aghast. He refused because he had found groups of children to be messy, ill-mannered, wasteful, and unappreciative. The teacher convinced him that her pupils would not fit this description so arrangements were made. After the meal both teacher and children were delighted to have the restaurant owner comment on their good behavior, manners, and food habits and to assure them they were welcome to return.

The teacher reported that the program was well worth the effort when she observed the empty trays being returned in the lunchroom and the obvious good health of the children reflected in work, play, and growth. The many complimentary letters from parents were also a source of gratification.

COOPERATIVE ACTIVITIES PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING

Cooperative menu planning.—Many lunch managers encourage teachers and students to share responsibility for menu planning. In some elementary schools, with the help of the lunch manager, classes plan menus that meet Type A standards. These menus are served as school lunches and the participating classes are given credit for them.

In some high schools, students serve on menu planning committees (NCN Jan.-Feb. 1955). Depth of understanding of the need for nutritional adequacy is increased as students gain a working knowledge of nutritional needs and how to meet them in terms of the money and food preparation facilities available.

In Hampton Elementary School, Hampton, S. C., parents were also involved. A committee made up of the school lunch manager, a faculty member, and a member of the Parent-Teachers Association planned lunch menus. Parents and teachers are valuable committee members. Because of their closeness to the children, they learn readily why children react as they do to innovations in the school lunch. Shared activities increase rapport between the food service department and parents and teachers who are often critical because they have little conception of the magnitude of the school lunch operation.

Home and school lunch program—a partnership.—Young children's food preferences are influenced by those about them—parents and teachers particularly. If the teacher sets a good example in the school lunch, good food practices among children are more likely to follow. This influence is strengthened if parents or other adults important to the child also display a positive attitude. Telling the youngster in school to eat nutritionally important foods, vegetables, for example, is not so effective as including those vegetables in family menus.

The teachers and school lunch staff with the active help of pupils in the Orangevale School District, Sacramento, Calif., found a way to help parents understand the objectives and procedures of the food service department and to include in family menus foods served in the school lunch. They prepared a booklet which included selected school lunch recipes popular with the children—main dishes, salads, salad dressings, sandwiches, desserts, and cookies. Information about what a Type A lunch is as well as what constitutes an adequate diet was also included.

The school lunch manager converted the quantity recipes to family size and selected the other information to be included. Teachers duplicated and assembled the material and primary grade children illustrated the booklet with original sketches. It was entitled "Your Child's Favorite Recipes" and was distributed to parents during Public Schools Week in April 1959.

The parents' reaction to the booklet was so encouraging that a copy was included in the November-December "School Lunch News" issued by the California State Department of Education as a suggested activity for other schools.

SPECIAL STUDENT-FEEDING PROBLEMS

Partial participants.—Two specific groups, particularly in the high schools, are reluctant to fully participate in the school lunch program. They are the weight-conscious students, usually girls, and the impatient students, usually boys, who rebel at going through the lunch line. In many instances, the "weight watchers" select a lunch that is dangerously low in important nutrients. The impatient student also often selects an unbalanced lunch—an a la carte sandwich, purchased either in the

school lunchroom or at a nearby store, supplemented with candy, soda, or crackers.

Both groups need to learn to select an adequate lunch to meet nutritional needs and personal preferences but until this education is successfully provided, a way must be found to encourage them to eat properly.

Weight-conscious students.—The school lunch manager of Martin Van Buren High School in Queens, N. Y., handled these problems with some success. Each day a low-caloric lunch, usually a salad plate, was featured which met Type A standards. All the food was attractively garnished and served but the low-caloric lunches were particularly appealing to the eye and consequently were in great demand by weight-conscious students.

Impatient pupils.—In dealing with the impatient students, the manager first made it easier to obtain a complete lunch. These lunches were served at 4 stations and sandwiches were made to order at 1 other station.

Complete "bag" lunches were available at 2 stations. These lines moved rapidly because the student merely picked up a bag which contained a hearty sandwich, a container of salad (usually potato or cole slaw), a container of milk, fresh fruit, a disposable fork, straws, and a napkin. Two luncheon combinations were served each day and the students knew the contents by the color of the bag.

The cost of paper supplies for the bag lunches raised the per lunch cost to some extent but the volume of total sales made it possible to serve all lunches at the same price. The addition of the low-caloric lunch and the "bag" lunch did increase total participation significantly and cut down considerably the a la carte sandwich sales.

Feeding the "still hungry" child.—Portions in most schools are adjusted to the bodily size of children. In the elementary schools smaller portions are given to the primary "tots" and larger ones are provided for the older group. In high schools girls seem to prefer and often request smaller portions than boys. Active students, particularly boys, often are still hungry after eating the Type A lunch. School lunch managers have dealt with this group in various ways. Some have the pupils bring back a "clean plate" and go through the line a second time, others have a special line for "seconds."

Augusta Raa Junior High School in Tallahassee, Fla., features a "seconds" cart. Each day a cart with bread, butter, peanut butter, and oranges is placed in the lunchroom. Most days cheese, fruit juice, or fruits other than citrus also appear on the cart. Students who bring back a "clean plate" signifying they have eaten the Type A lunch may eat all they want from the cart. The school lunch manager, a home economist, supervises this operation and finds it a good way to meet the food needs of children as well as a way to work directly with youngsters. This is her chance to chat with students and encourage them to supplement their lunches with citrus fruit and other foods found on the cart.

"SECONDS" CART LEADS TO CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

The manager's conversation with students and her status as a faculty member led to invitations to visit classrooms and to talk before the pupils. She took these opportunities to show youngsters by use of actual school lunch records that the school lunch supplies at least one-third of the day's nutritional recommendations and is also the best buy in town. She further explained the nutritional and economic reasons for including such foods as vegetables, casserole dishes, and salads on the menus. By making the students partners in the enterprise, she was able to persuade them to accept all the lunches. They know their constant participation made "bonus days" possible. On such days the lunch would feature 2 hamburgers along with other foods to meet Type A standards. The manager reported that children found the study of nutrition exciting when it was related to "What's for lunch?"

After one such session with a class of eighth graders, the manager was beseiged at the "seconds cart." One student explained, "After all the talk in class about nutrients, we decided to clean our plates and eat our oranges." That was a particularly rewarding day.

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